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Executive Director

12 March 2011

Judiciary Committee
Connecticut General Assembly
Hartford CT 06106

RE: Testimony in Support for Raised Bill 5147

Dear Members of the Judiciary Committee:

I am here today in support of HB 5147, An Act Concerning the Unauthorized Practice of Law by Notaries Public. My name is Angela Rossi Zurowski and I am the Executive Director of the International Institute of Connecticut, Inc., a statewide nonprofit organization dedicated to the needs of immigrants, refugees and foreign born victims of serious crimes. Collectively, its programs aim to help low income families become self-sufficient and integrated, and include refugee resettlement, language services, job assistance, educational programming as well as legal immigration assistance.

The Institute maintains a special status given by the Justice Department called BIA recognition, which allows charitable organizations to practice immigration law by way of both attorneys and non-attorneys. With BIA recognition, an agency such as the Institute may then apply for their staff members to become Accredited Representatives, provided that they demonstrate an advanced knowledge in immigration proceedings.

Since 1918, the Institute has assisted thousands of Connecticut's newest Americans with their immigration needs, helping them to become US citizens, be reunited with family members, and receive relief when victimized by the likes of political persecution, human trafficking, and sexual assault. The clients we see are hardworking, contributing members of our communities, who are transitioning to life in the United States, and often have many barriers to retaining private counsel, including lack of language, acculturation, and literacy in their own language.

Time and time again though, we see these same clients victimized and exploited by unauthorized practitioners of law, otherwise known as "notarios."

A notario publico, according to the Website of the National Association of Mexican Notaries, is "a highly specialized lawyer with special juridical formation." A notary public, on the other hand, is a public officer of the state, authorized by law to certify documents, take affidavits, and administer oaths. The difference is often lost in translation and the confusion is often dangerous.

"Notarios" operate throughout the Connecticut and use false advertising and fraudulent contracts for services which cannot be provided. They exploit the trust of immigrants who are new to this country, unfamiliar with our language and our legal system, and who assume that a "notario" is a lawyer with a duty to protect their interests. Notarios pose as qualified to assist immigrants in obtain lawful immigration status, becoming reunited with family and in many cases charge an obscene amount of money for a service that they never provide. Each week, we have clients come to our offices in hopes we can "fix" a case that was damaged by a notario, though in many cases the immigrants permanently lose opportunities to pursue immigration relief because a notario has damaged their case so badly.

Last year, a Sudanese woman came to our office in a desperate attempt to find some form of relief. In her country, she was a victim of religious persecution as well as gender based violence. In fear of death for returning to her country, she sought the advice from an unqualified practitioner who charged her thousands of dollars for an asylum application, which was never filed properly. As a result, her application was denied and she was placed in removal proceedings. Without the ability to work in the US, she was forced to live in unspeakable conditions and incurred further abuse from her "landlord" who exploited her based on her illegal status. Once in the care of the International Institute, a second asylum application was approved – granting her the right to live and work in the US legally and finally begin her life anew. This is a typical story that our staff hears daily.

It is time that the state of Connecticut stands up against notario deception, predator "immigration consultants" and other unauthorized practitioners, who in most cases are also notaries public by way of the Connecticut Secretary of State's office approval. It is time that Connecticut stops ignoring a practice that destroys families, a crime that is flourishing under the state sanctioned title of "notary public."

On behalf of the International Institute and the thousands of newcomers we serve each year, I thank you for your time and for your efforts in raising this concern.

Angela Rossi Zurowski
Executive Director